Gender, power and principles in humanitarian action

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March 2022

HPG
Humanitarian
Policy Group

ODI

How to cite: Daigle, M. (2022) *Gender, power and principles in humanitarian action*. HPG report. London: ODI (https://odi.org/en/publications/gender-power-and-principles-in-humanitarian-action).

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Acknowledgements

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Acronyms

CSO	civil society organisation
DV/IPV	domestic and intimate-partner violence
GBV	gender-based violence
HPG	Humanitarian Policy Group
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
LGBTQIA+	lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual, pansexual and allies
NGO	non-governmental organisation
SOGIESC	sexual orientations, gender identities/expressions and sex characteristics
UN	United Nations
WASH	water, sanitation and hygiene
WPS	Women, Peace and Security

1   Introduction

It has been firmly established that gender *matters* to inclusive and effective humanitarian action. International commitments, guidelines and statements have stacked up year on year, all recognising the gendered impacts of crises and calling for gender-responsive humanitarian action. This notably includes recent attempts to further align the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda with humanitarian action.[1] Crises of all kinds, including displacement, are traumatic, difficult, tumultuous – and unavoidably shaped by gender. Around the world, the impacts of these crises include dramatic upheavals in economic security and household divisions of labour; separation from family, community and even culture; and the emergence of new forms and amplification of old forms of gender-based violence (GBV). Individuals are impacted differently at every stage of displacement, often because of the different gendered roles, capacities and vulnerabilities that societies ascribe to them and the power relations that result (Holloway et al., 2019; see Box 1). Understanding changing gendered norms and roles is therefore central to more inclusive and effective responses to displacement.

Nonetheless, gender responsiveness (see Figure 1) in practice has remained patchy at best, even though it is known that displacement from home – and from stability and familiarity – tends to exaggerate gendered inequalities and can cause gender relations to shift rapidly. There is little emphasis on understanding the norms that underpin gendered impacts in a given context as foundational to intervening sensitively, supportively and without causing further harm. Many assumptions are at play, but there is little appetite to question the rightness of humanitarians' own intentions or actions. While #AidToo spotlighted international humanitarian actors' ways of working, there has been little meaningful change in leadership or practices in the humanitarian sector, and major actors and mechanisms like the Grand Bargain remain gender-blind.[2] As a result, gender-focused programming in humanitarian assistance is just not seen as critical in the same way as other life-saving aid and is often the first to suffer in the face of limited resources or time constraints.[3] Likewise, gender analysis is rarely applied to those programmes acknowledged as life-saving, such as food or shelter.

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1   From recent years, see the World Humanitarian Summit Core Commitments, Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) policy and accountability frameworks and the IASC Gender Handbook, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC) Gender Equality Policy Marker, the G7's Whistler Declaration on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and Girls in Humanitarian Action, and the Generation Equality Forum's Women, Peace and Security–Humanitarian Action Compact.

2   The Grand Bargain was launched in 2016 at the World Humanitarian Summit as a five-year agenda to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of humanitarian aid. Gender was not included in the language, leaving gender advocates to attempt to use the Grand Bargain as a mechanism to propel other agreements on gender forward. The Grand Bargain 2.0 was agreed in 2021, but even this lacks a meaningful gender lens (ActionAid, 2021; Metcalfe-Hough et al., 2021).

3   For example, according to the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) financial tracking service, funding for GBV interventions accounted for just 0.12% of all humanitarian funding – only one-third of funding requested (IRC and VOICE, 2019: 10). This funding gap is especially limiting for smaller, place-based civil society organisations (CSOs) working on gender issues in humanitarian settings.
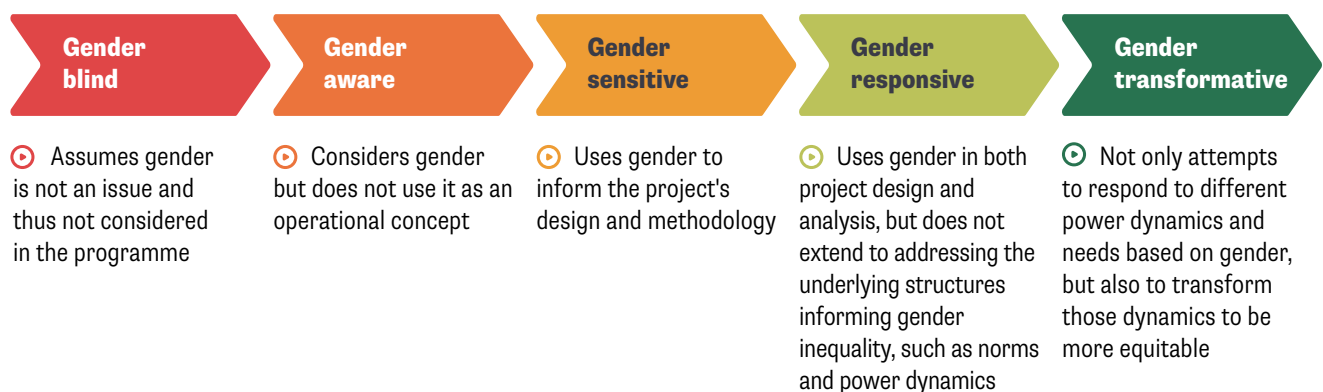
Box 1   What are gendered norms and roles?

'Gendered norms' are the implicit attitudes that govern acceptable behaviour according to gender – what activist Riki Wilchins (2020) calls the 'invisible "guard rails" that shape and narrow people's thinking, behaviours, and opportunities'. Gendered norms are sets of ideas that prescribe how women and men should behave and what part they should play on the basis of their gender, not just in their marriages and families but in the workplace, community, public life, and even conflict and crisis.[i] They are linked to assessments of men and women's relative capacities and skills – an assessment that purports to be 'natural' but is actually socially constructed. Built on a binary notion of gender, these norms are also heteronormative and exclusive of gender-diverse people.[ii] Resisting or rejecting prevailing norms can expose individuals to stigma and discrimination, various forms of social exclusion, and even violence.

'Gendered roles' are the everyday practices and tasks that tend to be performed by men and women respectively, which are frequently determined by underlying norms, but in which practical and material realities also play a part.

i   Whereas 'gender' is a social construction of characteristics, expectations and behaviours, 'sex' denotes the physiological and chromosomal differences that characterise the distinction between male and female in biological terms.

ii   Heteronormativity constitutes a set of beliefs, practices and attitudes that position a certain model of heterosexuality as the only conceivable sexuality and the only way of being 'normal'. By extension, all other identities, practices, relationships or ways of being are cast as abnormal or deviant (Myrttinen and Daigle, 2017).

Figure 1   A spectrum of approaches to gender

Gender blind	Gender aware	Gender sensitive	Gender responsive	Gender transformative
⊙ Assumes gender is not an issue and thus not considered in the programme	⊙ Considers gender but does not use it as an operational concept	⊙ Uses gender to inform the project's design and methodology	⊙ Uses gender in both project design and analysis, but does not extend to addressing the underlying structures informing gender inequality, such as norms and power dynamics	⊙ Not only attempts to respond to different power dynamics and needs based on gender, but also to transform those dynamics to be more equitable

Source: adapted from Butt et al. (2019)

In many ways, this state of affairs should not be at all surprising, given that the humanitarian system has proved slow-moving and highly resistant to change (Barnett and Walker, 2015; Barbelet et al., 2020). Hart and Krueger (2021: 2) write that:

> the humanitarian system is awash in well-meaning gender policies and tools. These are largely seen by gender experts as at best generic, neglecting power differentials, different local contexts, and sectoral fields.

Feminists and gender justice advocates have been pointing to the critical importance of gendered norms, roles and power relations for decades, but this dimension of crises remains poorly understood and accounted for in humanitarian policy and practice generally, and in displacement situations in particular. The scale of displacement, both internal and across borders, is only increasing. Emerging and resurgent crises like Afghanistan – a context which brings overt and high-profile gendered implications – further underscore the need to translate commitments into action. A thorough, contextualised and intersectional understanding of gendered norms and roles, and how they are changing in a given context over time, is therefore a foundational (but, to date, missing) building block for inclusive, effective and principled humanitarian action.

1.1   Methodology and outline

The Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) led a three-year research project examining change in gendered norms and roles in displacement, with the aim of informing more inclusive, appropriate and effective gender-responsive humanitarian action. The project comprises a literature review (Holloway et al., 2019) and qualitative case studies on returnees from conflict-related internal displacement in Pakistan (Levine, 2020), Venezuelan migration to Colombia (Holloway et al., forthcoming), and refugees and asylum seekers from South Sudan and other countries living in Uganda (Dolan and Tshimba, forthcoming). Each case study is based on semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with displaced communities and humanitarian actors. This research sits alongside other emerging efforts to push the conversation forward on gender in humanitarianism, such as United Nations (UN) Women's work on participation and localisation under the Grand Bargain (see Dietrich Ortega et al., 2020) and the Women's Refugee Commission's study on system-level transformation (Hart and Krueger, 2021).

This report offers a 'state of play' assessment of progress on gender responsiveness to date, based on a synthesis of the project's findings that has been tested through action research workshops with stakeholders from UN agencies, international and national non-governmental organisations (NGOs), academics and activists. In the next chapter, we sketch out the findings on gendered norms and roles from three years of qualitative research. The third chapter outlines the implications of these findings for international humanitarian actors – and for the future of gender-responsive humanitarian action – before we conclude by providing recommendations for funding, designing and delivering better for people of all genders.

2   Do gendered norms, roles and power relations change in displacement?

Our research demonstrates that complex changes in gendered roles and norms among people of all genders – women, men and gender-diverse individuals – are accelerated by crises of all kinds. Displacement specifically brings about a rupture within the usual social structures as well as exposure to host communities, international actors and other influences along migratory routes and in displacement. While displacement is often perceived as an immediate and time-bound shock, this framing ignores preexisting and ongoing gendered harms and violences – a constant state of crisis that transcends humanitarian crises. Just as displacement is often protracted, repeated and cyclical, the effects of which can be felt for a lifetime or even generations, the idea that the effects of displacement on gendered norms and roles can be isolated to the specific period of 'crisis' is misplaced.

There are indeed acute and persistent gendered harms associated with displacement – GBV along the migratory route is the most visible and readily acknowledged of these – but in terms of norms and roles, our research suggests that a host of other impacts are less commonly understood, many of which unfold on arrival and are largely invisible to humanitarian response. These may be related to the shock of displacement itself but also to dislocation from family, social supports and other networks. These shifts defy neat characterisations of nearly any kind, and in the course of our research we found them to be:

- both progressive *and* regressive
- non-linear
- context-specific
- intersectional and relational.

First of all, some shifts in gendered norms and roles can be understood as **regressive**, resulting in heightened risks or challenges for particular groups, while others represent **progressive** opportunities or openings in otherwise settled normative spaces.[4] This runs up against prevalent expectations that displacement will produce uniformly increased risks for women and girls specifically. Displacement often reinforces discrimination – for example, limiting access to education for girls, requiring young boys to work to support their families, restricting women's movement outside the home, expecting men to act as protectors – but it may also produce the opposite effect, which humanitarians tend not to see. In Pakistan, while living in displacement in Peshawar, people from the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (now the Newly Merged Tribal Districts) saw marked rises in women's paid economic activities and subsequently their decision-making power in their households. Men also transformed how they viewed themselves as husbands and fathers, taking more active roles in

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4   Any assessment of the positive or negative nature of change should be based on the self-defined priorities of the communities concerned, including marginalised groups within those communities and organisations working for social justice and inclusion.

their homes and families. These changes were due to a variety of factors, including a new economic model that necessitated waged employment by men and women alike, as well as the move to nuclear family housing from multigenerational compounds. Whereas in Pakistan informants reported making conscious decisions to change their ways of relating to one another, in other cases change may come about organically over time or as a reaction to perceived risks like rising GBV, which may incentivise keeping women and girls close to home.

Secondly, change happens over time in ways that are **non-linear**, often incremental and even unpredictable. It is not always clear what shifts can be attributed to displacement itself or to other, sometimes multiple and overlapping crises and changes that are occurring at the same time. Importantly, gendered harms also exist on a spectrum that extends before, during and after a crisis, and these preexisting patterns can be exacerbated (or indeed ameliorated) during displacement. In Colombia, we found shifts in the gendered divisions of labour, both paid and unpaid, that were strongly linked to Venezuela's economic collapse rather than displacement to Colombia alone, although these two crises are certainly interlinked. As a result, Venezuelan men and women in Colombia reported aspiring to have smaller families with fewer children since their displacement, which represented a marked change in how they perceived family and their own roles within it. In light of the multiple crises facing displaced Venezuelans, in terms of their displacement, economic crisis and lack of comprehensive social services, it was ultimately impossible to define a linear trajectory or discrete causes for each shift.

Outcomes in a particular setting depend on **context**, including the social, cultural, economic and political situation. Culture is often understood to act as a brake rather than an accelerator on gender justice; concepts like 'refugee culture' (Pittaway and Bartolomei, 2018: 6) and 'golden age-ism' (Myrttinen et al., 2014: 9), which describe a turn towards a more conservative and heteronormative notion of culture as a response to crises, including in family structures and gendered norms, support this. This can take the form of defaulting to restrictive ideas around caring or breadwinning roles, idealising the 'traditional' heteronormative family, or increased policing of what gendered behaviour and even appearance are deemed appropriate. This dynamic may be particularly strong for transborder and resettled refugees, for whom the link to 'home' is under threat and the prospect for return may be remote. In practice, however, the impact of culture is uneven and sometimes unpredictable. Cultural codes (for example, *Pakhtunwali* in Pakistan or *machismo* in Latin America) are interpreted in different ways across urban and rural locales, different economic and political systems, and diverse crisis settings. The part played by these codes in shifting gendered roles and norms is not universally regressive, although they may be deployed in the service of existing power structures and relations. Thus, in Pakistan, we found that rationales for gender justice that were rooted in Islam and Pashtun culture found traction with affected populations and influenced shifts in their thinking more so than those based in notions of rights or 'international' gender discourse.

Building on the importance of cultural context, gendered norm change is also **intersectional and relational**. Gender itself should be understood as relational – that is, there is a need to understand the full spectrum of relations in order to address the concerns or vulnerabilities of any one gendered

group, as well as any knock-on impacts. In Uganda, displaced men's experiences of sexual violence, unemployment and perceived declining position in their communities had a strong impact on their understandings of masculinity and their role in the family, which then precipitated mental health crises and substance abuse. Because gendered norms and roles are widely understood to be complementary, when those with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities/expressions and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) are targeted, it is often for their perceived failure to conform to accepted norms and roles within a wider ecosystem, as we found in both Colombia and Uganda.

Gender is also intersectional, meaning that it cannot be properly understood in isolation as it interacts (or intersects) with other systems of oppression – for example, racialisation/ethnicity, religion, socioeconomics and disability – to produce unique rather than cumulative forms of disadvantage (Holloway et al., 2019). Thus, while some forms of marginalisation may be the same, the challenges in displacement facing a white, upper-middle-class Venezuelan woman will be very different from those experienced by an Afro-Venezuelan lesbian teenager who has grown up in poverty, even from the same city. As a result, in the Colombian context, classifying women as vulnerable to gendered harms has not proved particularly helpful. Rather, people in transit, especially *caminantes* (those travelling on foot) and people confronting multiple marginalisations like those with diverse SOGIESC, impoverished women and girls, people with disabilities of all genders, and sex workers, experience heightened risks of GBV in all its forms.

Finally, it is **not at all clear if changes in gendered norms are permanent or sustainable**. In Pakistan, returnees had made conscious choices to preserve the changes they found empowering. However, in Uganda, our South Sudanese research participants spoke of concerns around whether changes – for example, the decline in arranged marriages or women's greater participation in paid work – would revert to form should they return home. Particularly in Colombia, everyday roles seemed to be changing due to practicalities and material realities, while norms were more stubborn.[5] Participants described shifts like women's increasing participation in paid labour, men's growing contribution to household work, and the exercise of greater choice regarding family size and childbearing; yet the underpinning attitudes and beliefs regarding who should act as carers versus breadwinners were less fluid. Some changes may revert with any normalisation of Venezuelans' circumstances, while others may solidify with time into genuine normative shifts, depending on how the changes are understood by displaced people themselves and a variety of other social, economic and cultural factors. **The moments when shifts – in norms, roles or both – are seen to be occurring are therefore important**: such moments can be supported or resisted, according to the self-defined priorities of affected populations and the marginalised groups within them. People are never passive in the face of these changes – rather, they are always active in alternately accepting, pursuing or contesting changes, resulting in a field of relations that is dynamic, iterative and constantly evolving.

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5   This and other findings are echoed by new research drawing on existing datasets by the World Bank (see Klugman, 2022).

By and large, the changes in norms and roles that we observed among displaced populations in Pakistan, Colombia and Uganda were poorly understood and accounted for in humanitarian interventions. While multi-mandate international NGOs have made some progress in applying a more intersectional and multifaceted lens to gendered dimensions of displacement, displacement-focused humanitarian actors are notably lagging behind, with limited understanding of gender responsiveness, mainstreaming or other core concepts. There is also a clear need to go beyond the common frames of how gender is understood with more in-depth training, analysis and learning within organisations. Meaningful analysis of gendered harms or norm change is limited by capacity, while actors are not equipped or incentivised to spend time with or in communities. Our research showed that people with diverse SOGIESC were largely marginalised within responses, although notably less so among national and local actors working on rights-based approaches and inclusion.[6] On the other hand, place-based actors – for example, national and local civil society organisations (CSOs), and especially those focused on marginalised groups like women, people with diverse SOGIESC and people with disabilities – are uniquely well positioned to see, understand and support the self-defined priorities of affected populations and the marginalised groups within them.

6   Here, we refer to the way that the needs of individuals and groups are deemed 'niche' by humanitarian responders and thus mostly ignored. There is evidence from Kenya that the perception that refugees with diverse SOGIESC are prioritised for financial support or resettlement can cause tensions between them, other displaced people and local people with diverse SOGIESC, regardless of whether the perception holds true (see Women's Refugee Commission, 2021).

3   What are the implications – and what should be the role of humanitarian and displacement actors?

Humanitarians need to cultivate a deeper awareness of the settings in which they intervene in order to do their work effectively and ethically, while doing the least possible harm. This is true across the board, but it is especially apparent when it comes to gender. Gendered norms and roles change, sometimes quickly, as people flee into displacement – but these shifts are not uniform and it is not possible to make assumptions or apply universal principles. These changes demonstrate the complexity, breadth and depth of gendered impacts in crisis settings, as well as how gender shapes outcomes in ways that are often invisible and unexpected, not just in protection and health but in food security, livelihoods, shelter, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), camp management and elsewhere. A narrow or siloed focus on 'gender' concerns is therefore demonstrably insufficient; what is needed is a gender lens across humanitarian responses. Participants in our action research workshops were also clear that these findings were completely unsurprising to them, after years or even decades of working in gender and humanitarian response, raising questions about political commitment and leadership, how gender is understood and therefore prioritised and funded, and how evidence is generated and deployed in the sector.

With that in mind, our research findings point to a number of important implications for humanitarian response, which have been elaborated in consultation with humanitarians based in UN agencies, international NGOs, universities, local and national NGOs, and activist groups.

3.1   Rethinking what counts as evidence for action

The fact that gender specialists described these findings as unsurprising is notable here: if the knowledge already exists, this suggests problems with what evidence is taken seriously as grounds to act. Sometimes long-accepted knowledge is anecdotal and circumstantial, lacking the support of concrete evidence; however, sometimes the evidence exists – from crisis settings or elsewhere – but has been overlooked or not counted as 'humanitarian' or even 'gender' knowledge.[7] Thus, in both Uganda and Colombia, displaced young men were specifically targeted by armed groups, yet this was not understood to be a gender concern and as a result young men were not included in protection work. Recent HPG research in north-east Nigeria similarly showed that long-term processes of exclusion were simply not understood in terms of how they rendered certain populations more vulnerable generally and in crises specifically, leading

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7   Notably, this need for further evidence does not apply to GBV. The current IASC (2015: 2) Guidelines state that: 'GBV is happening everywhere. ... Waiting for or seeking population-based data on the true magnitude of GBV should not be a priority in an emergency due to safety and ethical challenges in collecting such data. With this in mind, all humanitarian personnel ought to assume GBV is occurring and threatening affected populations; treat it as a serious and life-threatening problem; and take actions based on sector recommendations in these Guidelines, regardless of the presence or absence of concrete "evidence"'.

to the exclusion of young men and people with disabilities (Barbelet et al., 2021). A key element of what comes next for gender-responsive humanitarian action therefore needs to be a reassessment of the status of evidence. This means more emphasis on consultation and analysis that is rooted in the concerns and priorities of affected populations and marginalised groups, as noted above, but it also means rethinking the evidence we already have to see what counts as 'humanitarian' or 'gender' knowledge, and what has been overlooked to date but could now be used to paint a fuller picture.

In thinking about what counts as evidence, participants in our research called for resistance to trends towards use of 'big data' and quantification. While there is a clear need for better disaggregation in existing data collection efforts – not just by gender but gender identity, sexuality, racialisation, disabilities and other characteristics – the growing deification of quantitative data as the gold standard for evidence downplays the nuance and context that is so badly needed. An over-focus on 'number crunching' also risks accepting poor-quality quantitative data while dismissing other forms of evidence, even when it is more than sufficient to motivate action. Particularly when it comes to understanding gendered norms and displacement-related change, what is needed is more granular, embedded, qualitative research that is inspired by sociological and anthropological methods and gives displaced people ownership over the findings. Gendered norm change is a process, rather than a single acute event, and humanitarian analyses and assessments would do well to start from displaced people's own reading of how their lives are changing over time. This will help humanitarians understand not just that changes are happening, but how and why, and what support affected people – and especially marginalised groups – want in embracing or resisting change, as well as forums to legitimise and act on this information.

Within that comes an impetus to resist the flattening of diverse people into boxes or categories. As the drive towards metrics and quantification continues, humanitarians are asked to slot people into categories of risk or vulnerability, losing an appropriate understanding of multiple marginalisations, difference and humanity. As Barbelet and Wake (2020: 8) argue, this categorical model of vulnerability is problematically one-dimensional, bringing about a:

> fragmentation of inclusion by diversity factors such as disability, gender or age … while technical approaches to inclusion are necessary, they are not sufficient.

Explicitly naming certain groups of marginalised people – notably, people with diverse SOGIESC – can be politically significant and resist their erasure, but this needs to be considered alongside protection risks that come with increased visibility. These risks underline the need for participatory assessments that put control over data collection in the hands of displaced people themselves and include marginalised people and their organisations in those processes.

There is a critical need for better-quality and more appropriate evidence to inform humanitarian assessments, programme design, implementation and evaluation, but there is also a pressing need to reexamine existing evidence and internalised biases about what 'counts' and which voices gain traction. If humanitarians are to really come to grips with changes in gendered norms, roles and power relations, as humanitarians, they need to consistently ask who is falling through the cracks, and how their own perceptions and attitudes stack up against available data and evidence.

3.2   Humanitarians are not exempt from norms

There is a prevailing perception that humanitarian actors can choose whether they want to engage in gender work or not, and therefore whether they are shaping gendered norms or need to take account of them. Humanitarian actors certainly contribute to norm change when they undertake programming that aims to 'empower' women or otherwise redress imbalances in decision-making, economic resources or experiences of violence. That said, humanitarian actors of all kinds are already intervening in gendered relations simply by being present and conducting their activities. They are part of a changing social, cultural and political landscape and alternately support or repress changes from the moment they intervene in a given crisis, whether they know it or not. For international actors in particular, then, it should be recognised that humanitarians do not exist outside or at a distance from gendered norms and roles.

The first way that this is relevant is internal and structural, especially within the formal humanitarian architecture. The sector is unavoidably shaped by the patriarchal, heteronormative, colonial and neoliberal thinking that underpins humanitarianism as an international project. Agencies and institutions come with their own sets of norms, inequalities and unconscious biases that are shaped not only by gender but by sexuality, disability, racialisation and socioeconomic class – and these carry over to programmes and projects. This is evident in leadership and hiring practices, where we continue to see a majority of white, European or North American men occupying senior leadership positions regardless of the setting. Indeed, Myfanwy James (2022) and Degan Ali (Adeso Africa, 2020) highlight the way that international humanitarian organisations perpetuate this state of affairs, positioning Western leadership as preferable and justifying the exclusion of non-Western staff from senior roles.

Humanitarians participating in our research noted that, in humanitarian operations, too much continued to depend on the will of country directors or other leaders, resulting in gender issues being relegated to second-tier concerns that only came into play after recognised 'life-saving' services had been delivered. Gender experts need to be embedded into humanitarian teams and in more senior positions, so that they can advise (or indeed become) leaders, and so that mitigating gendered harms and supporting opportunities can be a core part of recovery. Likewise, demonstrated commitment to inclusion, including on gender, should be a prerequisite for leadership positions. In our case studies, humanitarians interviewed also noted that training on gender was largely optional or even relied on self-study, which limits the potential to embed an awareness of gendered impacts across responses. In a similar vein, Hart and Kruger (2021: 1) write that:

> a gender-transformative agenda must happen **within** humanitarian organizations in order for the operational work they do to actually achieve inclusive gender-transformative outcomes. This internal organizational change must, importantly, center on hiring staff – especially leaders – with the capacity for and commitment to gender-transformative change. This change also rests on the creation of a culture of and systems for accountability to transformative processes and outcomes.

While local culture is often a topic of concern, humanitarian culture features less frequently, despite the role it plays in shaping organisations themselves through their leadership, structures, decision-making and priorities.[8]

These structural and cultural concerns then feed into the substance of humanitarian policy and practice, where norms surface in how humanitarians assess needs and vulnerabilities, shape programmes, and prioritise resources. Vulnerability frameworks, although they are widely understood as a justification for action or prioritisation, can be defined very differently by different actors and are not capturing many dimensions of gendered experiences of diverse risks, opportunities and challenges, and especially those related to gendered norms (see Box 2). This is sometimes due to a lack of evidence of the harms experienced and sometimes due to a narrow lens of what 'counts' as gender concerns – for example, concerns related to men or people with diverse SOGIESC are often not counted. While women face multiple and overlapping vulnerabilities, these are not uniform, and lumping women together (and sometimes with children) as 'vulnerable' is overly general and problematic. This is one part of a much wider issue with humanitarian assessments that tend not to address drivers of vulnerability, positioning vulnerability as a static and innate problem of the individual rather than of structural exclusions and power relations.

In practice, this gendered thinking is evident in how humanitarian response uses a kind of shorthand related to gender and family that has long been set aside by development and peacebuilding actors. For example, a 'woman-headed household' is widely presumed to be a marker of vulnerability, but there are questions around how this category is defined and its utility, as well as what risks and challenges it obscures.[9] Likewise, the 'household' is the basic unit of analysis for nearly all quantitative humanitarian assessment, but this tends to implicitly assume a nuclear family structure with a (generally male) head. That model, however, is not the norm for all, or even most in some settings. Other models include multigenerational and extended families, as we observed in Pakistan (Levine, 2020), or 'chosen' families that may not be recognised by states or humanitarians themselves, such as those made up of individuals with diverse SOGIESC or others travelling together for reasons of economics or solidarity.

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8   Humanitarian culture has also been discussed with regard to security trainings (Daigle et al., 2021), sexual harassment (Spencer, 2018), stigma against lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual, pansexual and allies (LGBTQIA+) colleagues (Rainbow Network, 2016), and sexual exploitation and abuse (Lokot, 2021).

9   In Jordan, recent HPG research found that multiple international humanitarian agencies prioritise assistance to 'women-headed households', defined as those without an able-bodied man aged 18–59, based on a presumption of non-vulnerability of men within the household and despite sometimes significant needs for assistance and support (Gray Meral et al., forthcoming).

Box 2   Key dilemmas and indicators for humanitarian policy and practice

Our research points to a number of questions that humanitarians should ask themselves as they design and conduct assessments and analyses to shed light on changing gendered norms, roles and power relations – and then adapt their responses accordingly. While this list is by no means exhaustive, it is suggestive of what taking gendered norms and their impacts into account could look like.

- **Who is performing unpaid care work?** The provision of, support for and attitudes towards unpaid care work (cooking, cleaning, caring for children and elders) within a household are overwhelmingly gendered. Changes in that division of labour are highly illustrative of shifting norms around appropriate roles for men and women, and also relevant for humanitarians responding to vulnerabilities and opportunities as these changes shape access to education and paid work, impoverish many displaced women and their families, and negatively impact on well-being in terms of rest and leisure.
- **Are domestic and intimate-partner violence (DV/IPV) changing?** Violence within families is often invisible, but it is a critical protection issue for humanitarians as well as an important window into gender relations. It is important to resist assumptions about why changes are occurring, as our research showed decreases in DV/IPV in Pakistan but increases in both Colombia and Uganda, all for very different reasons and thus requiring different solutions from responders. In Colombia, Venezuelans credited higher rates of DV/IPV to the loss of family and community networks and low awareness of available institutional responses. On the other hand, participants in Uganda described tensions arising from displacement, their sense of social dislocation and prior exposure to violence (see also Okello and Hovil, 2007).
- **Are people with diverse SOGIESC experiencing backlash or moments of greater acceptance?** Changing attitudes towards gender and sexual diversity, including acceptable clothing and presentation, can indicate shifting ideas about gender. These experiences can be relative to people's own communities, host communities, host states and/or aid actors themselves. Research by International Alert describes how Syrians with diverse SOGIESC faced heightened risks of extortion, harassment and violence while living in displacement in Lebanon, emanating from security services, their own communities and even the Lebanese LGBTQIA+ community. At the same time, working with Syrian refugees with diverse SOGIESC has encouraged Lebanese CSOs to become more outspoken on their rights and creating space for them (see Myrttinen and Daigle, 2017; Myrttinen et al., 2017).

- **Who is missing from households and families and how does this impact vulnerability?**
  Absent family members may have died or become estranged or separated (sometimes
  temporarily) in the course of flight and displacement. This can occur for a variety of reasons,
  such as forced recruitment and armed service, especially for men; pendular migration[i] and
  work-related separations; and rejection of family members, which may particularly affect
  women and people with diverse SOGIESC. Recent HPG research in north-east Nigeria showed
  that humanitarians perceived women and girls as having the greatest needs because they
  formed the majority attending humanitarian services and distributions, without a serious
  analysis of why men and boys were not present or what needs and vulnerabilities that might
  indicate (Barbelet et al., 2021).
- **What activism and advocacy for inclusion is emerging from displaced communities
  themselves?** Humanitarians should seek out grassroots efforts, even at the most micro and
  informal levels, for change within families, neighbourhoods and communities on their own
  terms. In Pakistan, women's agency was key to cultivating and maintaining the changes they
  wanted to see – most notably, they continued to live in nuclear family households rather than
  returning to multigenerational homes.

i   'Pendular migration' refers to patterns of movement by which people travel back and forth multiple times
between their home community and displacement. This is often related to accessing paid work or necessities
that are otherwise unavailable.

3.3   Politics and principles

Ultimately, confronting humanitarians' own deep-rooted gendered norms and improving the evidence base
on norm change will mean recognising that **gender justice is not a technical fix – it is political**. Moving
forward therefore means asking critical questions about how gender is understood and how principled
humanitarian action is conducted. Many of the field-based international humanitarians we interviewed
repeatedly cited humanitarian principles – namely, their commitment to remaining impartial and neutral
– as inhibitors to engaging more meaningfully on gendered norms, roles and power relations. Impartiality
was viewed as a reason to reject tailoring responses to the specific needs of women or gender-diverse
people beyond protection concerns, whether in food distributions or other recognised immediate needs.
Impartiality, however, is about meeting the needs of a diverse population effectively and, given that these
needs vary, so too should the assistance offered. This is therefore not a question of limiting reach by
prioritising ever-narrower sets of people, but rather of reaching what is already a wide and diverse population
more effectively and appropriately with interventions that serve their self-defined needs and priorities.

Similarly, neutrality is rightly understood as key to negotiating access to communities in crisis, as
participants highlighted again and again. But in practice, participants pointed to their neutrality
to explain shying away from topics perceived to be 'sensitive': in Colombia, this meant wariness of
facilitating or advocating for safe abortion care for displaced people who needed it; while in Uganda,
the notion of extending protection or badly needed services to people with diverse SOGIESC

provoked discomfort and even fear among international actors. (Notably, the local and national actors interviewed for our case studies – mostly organisations focused on rights and inclusion – did not report sharing these apprehensions.) Pictet – the acknowledged architect of the humanitarian principles – argued that neutrality should never trump the requirement to respond to the most acute forms of suffering without discrimination (see O'Callaghan and Leach, 2013). Furthermore, such conceptions of neutrality are necessarily exclusive and colonial, as only 'the foreign is neutral' while local humanitarian responders are painted as inherently partial (Ali quoted in James, 2022: 486).

The purpose of humanitarian principles is weakened if they are understood as constraints on ensuring people with the most urgent needs can overcome barriers to access. These debates are also well established in humanitarian circles, which suggests that here the principles are a convenient escape from much harder conversations about gaps in commitment, leadership and political will. Humanitarians engage in highly fraught, militarised and political environments, and as such they cannot ignore complex power relations that create and maintain acute vulnerabilities under the banner of neutrality or impartiality. Their role is to understand and engage, which is not only key to participatory, inclusive and self-led humanitarianism – it is key to all forms of effective humanitarian action. To account for the complexity and pervasiveness of gendered impacts in displacement, policy and practice need to be politically engaged and rights-based, bring an intersectional understanding of diversity, and be alert to the power relations and discourses that produce gendered norms and underpin gendered harms for all.

3.4   Don't do more gender work – do better gender work

There is a common refrain that the role of humanitarianism is not to change gendered norms – that norm change is beyond the mandate of humanitarian actors and risks the perception (or indeed the reality) of imposing a particular model or a 'top-down' approach. In our interviews and discussions, humanitarians questioned whether humanitarian response could ever be truly gender-responsive, much less gender-transformative. These queries are particularly salient against a backdrop of intense competition among actors for limited humanitarian funding pots and strained capacity, which can limit aspirations, energy and resources to do more (or better).

The goal, however, is *not* for humanitarian actors – and especially international ones – to expand gender programming and take on the task of gender transformation. Rather, humanitarian leaders should cultivate a two-pronged approach that first brings a gender lens to their own organisational structure, policies and programming to ensure they are targeting the right people with the right support. Humanitarians cannot effectively respond to the needs and vulnerabilities that arise from displacement and from shifting gendered norms without first understanding them and, moreover, without understanding there is also a real risk of doing harm.

Bringing a gender lens to international humanitarian work is an admittedly big ask: it demands thorough commitment and political will from leaders, which itself necessitates meaningful accountability to affected people. With that kind of leadership, humanitarian actors can then invest in training and organisational learning, produce granular analyses of crises to paint a more complete picture of the

settings where humanitarians intervene, and embed an alertness to gendered risks and opportunities across areas of work. As noted here, training on gender is largely elective among international humanitarian agencies, but standards and guidelines are opaque and proliferating; staff need help to navigate the plethora of guidance and apply it to their own areas of expertise. The dynamism and complexity of shifts in norms and roles among displaced people demonstrate just how pervasive and foundational gender concerns are, and thus they need to be mainstreamed meaningfully into every area of humanitarian response, not just in protection or other recognised 'gender' issues. For example, our Pakistan research showed impacts on economic activities and housing as well as GBV.

Second, humanitarian response should position appropriate local and national organisations – namely, those serving marginalised groups like women, people with diverse SOGIESC and people with disabilities – as leaders in inclusive, localised humanitarian responses that span the so-called 'triple nexus'.[10] This begins with decentring international humanitarian action and devolving power to local CSOs, empowering them with the funding and authority necessary to do targeted work on gender concerns instead. UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, Martin Griffiths (2021), recently noted that:

> it is communities themselves that are always the first to respond. They are the first responders to the needs of people affected by crisis.

Women's positioning as carers means that they are always at the forefront of this, in their homes and communities and in the organisations they lead. In addition to being the *first* responders, they are also – especially in displacement settings – the most *knowledgeable and relevant* responders to gendered injustices, because they are from the communities impacted by crisis.

In displacement, where local and national organisations may also be 'outsiders' to the displaced population, it is especially important that displaced people themselves – and marginalised groups within those populations – are front and centre. CSOs based in host populations may also face social, cultural or linguistic barriers. Likewise, when it comes to marginalised populations who are subject to stigma and discrimination even from their own communities, it is critical that this engagement with place-based CSOs is informed by principles of inclusion and alert to dynamics of gatekeeping, discrimination and exclusion. This is therefore not a call to support *any* existing CSOs but rather to seek out those working on inclusion to avoid duplication of efforts or working at cross-purposes, and to begin seeing displaced people themselves as active agents in humanitarian response. Where there has been a tendency to treat affected populations as passive blank slates, arriving without histories or backstories, among them may be (and likely are) people already working for change, formally or informally. These include feminists and women's rights activists, as well as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual, pansexual and allies (LGBTQIA+) advocates, disability activists and other allies, among both displaced and host populations. Our own research, as well as that from UN Women (Dietrich Ortega et al., 2020), shows that these individuals and groups are both active and keen to engage.

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10   The concept of the 'triple nexus' is used to describe the interconnections between the humanitarian, development and peace sectors, as well as an agenda to promote better coordination and coherence across the three.

International humanitarians should reorient their approach to one of walking with the movements, networks and activisms of displaced populations rather than supplanting them. Supporting and committing to actually funding place-based actors – including women's rights organisations, women-led organisations, and those representing or led by people with diverse SOGIESC or people with disabilities – is the logical next step in decentring international actors. In displacement settings, such local and national CSOs have a deep, embedded knowledge of their context and related gendered norms, and they are already working on the self-defined priorities of affected communities and marginalised groups within them. Their ways of seeing and understanding their communities can also differ from the international actors' lens, and they can facilitate participation by functioning as 'connectors' (Dietrich Ortega et al., 2020: 11).

This is partly a question of getting out of the way, as current practices of cascading funding and opportunities downwards from governments, other donors and UN agencies via the medium of large international NGOs leaves little for CSOs in the end, as well as less flexibility to design and deliver their own interventions. Evidence from our case study in Colombia and other recent research also points to cases of international NGOs coopting and claiming responsibility for the work of place-based organisations (Anderson, 2017; Njeri and Daigle, forthcoming).

Working with local and national CSOs additionally promises to advance two long sought-after and ostensibly transformative humanitarian agendas that have also suffered from limited funding and commitment: localisation and participation under the Grand Bargain, and collaboration across the so-called 'triple nexus'. Indeed, UN Women's research argues that:

> women's meaningful participation in humanitarian response, and the localization of humanitarian action to women's rights organizations and self-led groups, were key drivers of gender-transformative change. Moreover, we found that strategies to promote gender-transformative change also increased the quantity and quality of women's participation and the effective localization of humanitarian resources and programming (Dietrich Ortega et al., 2020: 9).

Local humanitarian action is by no means a panacea for creating inclusive responses – as noted previously, where local communities and families (including women themselves) can be a site of exclusion and discrimination for marginalised people, so too can intra-local power dynamics mean that organisations representing marginalised groups are often side-lined – but it nonetheless represents a critical step. Similarly, the gendered challenges brought about by displacement cannot be neatly compartmentalised on the aid sector's terms, and thus local and national CSOs that dedicate themselves to gender justice are well placed to work across the siloes of humanitarian, development and peacebuilding. The nexus that matters here is, in fact, not 'just' triple, because working with local and national CSOs also means taking rights-based approaches to heart.

4   Charting a feminist path forward

Humanitarianism's frameworks for understanding and operationalising not just gender but also vulnerability, empowerment and inclusion create critical gaps in humanitarians' ability to see, understand and act on gender. Responding appropriately to shifts in gendered norms, roles and power relations requires much more than technical solutions – it requires a paradigm shift inside humanitarian organisations. Gendered harms and exclusions are certainly exacerbated by crises – displacement among them – but they are not confined to those spaces alone, and thus solutions to them cannot be found in isolation either. Gendered norms, roles and power relations are therefore a useful illustration of that fact, stretching into every area of life before, during and after crisis, as well as important social dynamics that merit attention and understanding as part of effective, inclusive and appropriate humanitarian responses to displacement.

As more and more actors seek to adopt the banner of feminism in the international sphere – feminist foreign policy, feminist international assistance, feminist humanitarianism – this study also functions as a useful reflection on what that framing really means. A feminist ethos should take us closer to a humanitarian system that is not just accountable to affected people and gender-responsive, but accessible and responsive to all affected people, regardless of their gender and in all their diversity. It should be alert to the structural power relations and discourses that produce gendered harms, not just their most acute and visible outcomes, and it should centre affected people's voices, priorities and agency. In that sense, a feminist approach sits at the core of inclusion as a humanitarian agenda, hand in hand with movements for racial justice and decolonisation – and, like decolonisation, a feminist approach cannot be a metaphor or 'comfortable buzzword' for international institutions.[11] It must mean real accountability, commitment and structural change.

4.1   Recommendations

Our examination of changing gendered norms and roles in displacement, as well as humanitarian efforts to respond appropriately to these changes and to gendered harms broadly writ, lead us to make the following recommendations for UN agencies, international NGOs and donors providing funding for humanitarian assistance:

● Recognise that, for humanitarian action to be effective, humanitarians must engage deeply in the social dynamics at play in a given context and understand their implications for both acute risks and longer-term vulnerability. Side-stepping this awareness under the guise of neutrality, cultural relativism or concerns that 'doing gender' is about inciting transformative change means that humanitarians are missing key gender-related needs. These include violence against and exclusion of men and people with diverse SOGIESC in certain settings, sexual and reproductive health and rights in displacement settings, and changes in household divisions of labour that bring about undue burdens of work and shifting power relationships.

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11   For more on the difficulty of defining or bringing about decolonisation, especially in the humanitarian sector, see James (2022: 476); Tuck and Yang (2012); Aloudat (2021).

- Make gender justice a cross-cutting (not siloed) priority, including within their own organisation's staff and culture.
  - Require capacity-building on gender among humanitarian staff, regardless of their area of expertise.
  - Promote and hire women and gender-diverse people, as well as people from other under-represented/marginalised groups – including from among displaced populations – into senior humanitarian roles.
  - Promote understanding of how gender shapes impacts and outcomes across thematic areas of work, not just in the under-funded protection sector but in WASH, food security, health, shelter and camp coordination. Make this awareness central to programme design and delivery, as a core part of an effective, inclusive and participatory response.
  - Employ a relational and intersectional understanding of gender in fulfilling commitments under the Call to Action on GBV in Emergencies and the WPS agenda.

- Support simple, user-friendly guidance and training that summarises core commitments and guidelines in order to mainstream gender sensitivity and awareness in humanitarian response.

- Decentre international humanitarian response and shift the emphasis to place-based CSOs as humanitarian actors working on inclusion, as a core part of fulfilling commitments under the Grand Bargain's enabling priority for localisation.
  - Recognise the leadership of place-based specialist CSOs on gender justice work, especially women's rights organisations, women-led organisations, organisations serving LGBTQIA+ and people with diverse SOGIESC, and disability organisations.
  - Shift direct and flexible resources directly to place-based organisations that are focused on the rights of diverse communities and/or that are led by women, people with diverse SOGIESC or people with disabilities.
  - Push donors to provide multi-year, flexible, core funding for humanitarian crises that allows for adaptation to contextual realities and work across the humanitarian, development and peacebuilding nexus.
  - Demystify culture by working more closely with and being led by place-based CSOs with a deep knowledge of context.
  - Adapt partnership guidelines to reduce barriers around bids/proposals, project implementation and reporting; provide support for proposal development and translate all calls for proposals and guidance into all relevant languages.

- Prioritise better assessment, consultation and analysis that is participatory and gives affected people ownership over the process. The 'Beyond consultations' toolkit is a useful starting point for thinking about how to do consultations better.[12]
  - Create spaces for two-way dialogue with people of all genders and gender identities, as well as their organisations.

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12   See: https://beyondconsultations.org.

- – Consult with affected people and inclusion-focused CSOs, not only on the substance of interventions but also methods, mechanisms and forums for accountability and consultation.
- – Operationalise commitments to participation and conflict prevention under the WPS agenda and related UN Security Council resolutions.[13]

- Improve data collection to better reflect gendered vulnerabilities and opportunities as dynamic, non-linear, contextual, relational and intersectional.
  - – Develop tools to facilitate qualitative data collection.
  - – Strengthen longitudinal data on gender and displacement being generated by the UN, including but not limited to quantitative endeavours like the World Bank–UN Refugee Agency Joint Data Center on Forced Displacement.[14]
  - – Monitor change over time and implement appropriate cross-checking in recognition of the fact that gendered norms and roles are never static and always evolving.
  - – Support place-based researchers to conduct studies and evaluations of international humanitarian actors' involvement in responses.
  - – Build user-friendly gender rapid assessment tools with local partners and support their collection and use of that data to carry out advocacy on their own self-defined priorities.

13   For more on the links between humanitarian response and the WPS agenda, see GADN (2021).

14   See: www.jointdatacenter.org.

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